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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 004849

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/04/2013

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SUBJECT: POLL RESULTS REFLECT GROWING POPULAR DESIRE FOR
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Classified By: PolCouns Doug Silliman, per Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) A Jordanian pollster who has conducted a number of studies in the country over the past several years believes that there is a growing disconnect between government pronouncements on democracy and the popular perception of Jordanian "half-democracy." In a recent conversation with Pol Intern, he discussed a variety of issues including: rule of law and justice; the persistence of elements of authoritarianism; the role and durability of parliamentary blocs; controversial "temporary laws;" and municipal elections. His research points to the conclusion that Jordanians desire a more inclusive and open political sphere that promotes a real program of democratization.

12. (C) With the end of the war in Iraq and violence down in the West Bank, Jordanians are now more likely to turn their attention to domestic issues. Embassy contacts echo what we have heard anecdotally from both government officials and non-governmental leaders, and the pollster's conclusions bolster what seems to be a rise in popular calls for greater participation. End Summary.

Polls Not Always Pleasant

13. (C) Pol Intern met July 17 with Dr. Fares Braizat, coordinator of the Center for Strategic Studies' Opinion Polling Unit at the University of Jordan. Braizat earned a Ph.D. in politics and government from the University of Canterbury, England, and has published a number of studies on politics, culture, and democratization. He claimed that he and his colleagues at the Center have come under government fire in the past for poll results which did not mesh with the government's desired results. On more than one occasion, he claimed, the Center was on the verge of being shut down.

Anti-Government Forces

14. (C) In three recent polls, Braizat surveyed random samples of people nationally, in Palestinian refugee camps and in the conservative city of Ma'an. While there is some measure of discontent with the government and pace of democratization across the board, Ma'an was statistically worse than the other two samples. Its population's generally pessimistic attitudes toward the central government, which boiled over into streets protests in 1989, the mid-1990s, and 2002, were reflected in the way the Ma'an community ranked Jordanian democracy behind all countries in the region, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. Surveying attitudes of the residents of Ma'an, Braizat found that most do not believe the government does enough to promote democratization, the rule of law, and a fair system of justice. Rather, they seem to believe that the grievances they hold today are essentially those which first sparked violence fourteen years ago.

15. (C) With no generally recognized channel of communication with the central government and a system of patronage that does not seem to reach all sectors of Ma'an's conservative society, people there will continue to feel isolated and resentful of governmental operations nationally, Braizat posited. He suspects that if the trend of general dissatisfaction with community-government relations and the perceived lackluster performance of MPs continues, Jordan could see "more Ma'ans" in the future. In particular, he points to the Bani Hamida community in central, rural Jordan, as the most likely new candidate for unrest in the next two years. While dissatisfaction does not necessarily mean violence is likely, Braizat did suggest that the same conditions exist today between Bani Hamida and the government as they did between Ma'an and Amman. (Comment: An academic told PolCouns recently that the Bani Hamida had elected three young and well educated MPs, and he expected that they would press Bani Hamida interests in Parliament -- perhaps reducing some of this pressure. End Comment.)

Popular Concerns

16. (C) In general, according to Braizat, the optimism that greeted the ascension of King Abdullah II in 1999 has faded. Also in decline is the percentage of people who feel their civil and political rights are safeguarded by the state (hovering around 15 percent). The vast majority of Jordanians, he said, feel that their fiscal contributions to the government benefit an elite 10 percent of the population. In addition, Braizat said most people report eroding respect for the institutions of governance since the early 1990s: for example, more than 50 percent of the population believe it is difficult to find justice in Jordanian courtrooms. The population also feels its government has corrupted and systematically undermined Parliament through rewarding MPs with automobiles and other fringe benefits, Braizat claimed.

The Persistence of the Political System

17. (C) Foreign aid programs, argued Braizat, are failing to create a new democratic structure for Jordan; rather, they reinforce "authoritarian patterns." In terms of the King's own approach to development in tribal areas, Braizat criticized the government's distribution of money to satisfy short-term "begging letters" (individual and tribal petitions to the King) from Bedouins and instead advocated a more sustainable approach to development in those areas of the country most dependent on governmental support.

Parliamentary Blocs

18. (C) According to polling done in the past, Braizat found 15 percent of Jordanians feel the Islamic Action Front (IAF) represents their political, social, and economic aspirations. The next most popular party, former Parliament speaker Abdul Hadi Majali's Constitutional Bloc, garnered only one percent. The remaining 74 percent of the population is tribal in its orientation and represents a significant swing-vote for Jordanian lawmakers.

Mechanisms of Governance

19. (C) Braizat's polling data suggests that while Jordanians are on the whole dissatisfied with certain aspects of their political system, they are eager to work within it to produce change. Citizens are less impressed with individual political actors than with their Parliament and other mechanisms of governance.

10. (C) That said, he believes that the large number of laws promulgated by the government (including 17 in the days before parliamentary elections), appointment of half of city council members, and other government steps contribute to the popular perception that Jordan is "half-democratic." He concluded that transparency and accountability are not only necessary in Jordanian politics today, but are also increasingly demanded by a frustrated population.

Comment

11. (C) As the war in Iraq recedes and the Middle East peace process shows signs of real progress (especially a reduction of violence in the West Bank), many Jordanians are likely to focus on concerns even closer to home such as the economy and political participation. Braizat's unreleased polling research confirms what we are hearing anecdotally from a growing number of our contacts -- members of Parliament, political analysts, pundits, and the press: that Jordanians want to feel more included in the process of government. Several MPs and senior staff at the Palace have mentioned to us recently their recognition of a growing popular desire for more democracy. Whether the government and Palace respond with concrete progress remains to be seen, but the return of Parliament is a good first step.

12. (C) The opening of Parliament has already widened the space for political discourse in Jordan. Along with this increase in politics is likely to come an increase in the number and volume of gripes and complaints against the government. The government will have to thicken its skin to this noise if it is going to pursue greater participation.

GNEHM